

Opinions on the Border

FROM THE COLLECTIONS: BORDER OPINIONS

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In the middle of the nineteenth century, arguments about slavery and the possible outbreak of war between the North and South caused rifts in many friendships and families. This was especially true in border states like Kentucky. Two letters, in separate collections recently received by the William Henry Smith Memorial Library, show how border Southerners could reach opposing points of view.

On 14 November 1860, eight days after Lincoln's election, T. K. Campbell, a Maysville, Kentucky, lawyer, wrote to his brother Leander M. Campbell, who in 1852 had moved to Danville, Indiana, and was later a lawyer and state legislator.

I seldom talk politics. . . . We are both quick, impetuous, high-tempered, rash. We might become alienated one from each other [if we] allude to those excitable subjects . . . [but] I may be pardoned for writing a thought or so. . . .

This country would be vastly better off without, than it is with slavery. . . . The question is . . . slavery being engrafted, by our forefathers, upon this generation, how are we to get rid of it? Shall we liberate the slaves among us, and make them in all respects . . . equal, . . . or shall we send them away. . . . Mr. Clay considered that the only way to relieve this great and growing evil was by . . . gradual emancipation and colonization. . . . But for the interference of the North, this system would now be in active operation in the state of Kentucky. . . .

The South does not fear Mr. Lincoln. . . . We believe him to be an honest and conservative man. . . . I do not object to his sentiments on the slavery question. I believe that he will . . . endeavor to make a conservative, a national, and a law abiding President. . . . We do fear the aggressive spirit of the party which placed him in power. I fear that he will be unable to control his party. If he cannot do so, this Union will dissolve. If he does succeed in doing so, the republican party will be blown to atoms.

. . . If the Union is to be disrupted, I, conservative and anti-slavery though I be, desire to see Kentucky go with the South. I will go with her, and remain with the graves and dust of my

children, my father and my brothers and sisters. I cannot and will not leave them.

John T. Dye expressed the opposite viewpoint in his letter written on 22 December 1860, two days after South Carolina seceded from the Union. Dye was a graduate of Bethany College and the University of Louisville law school; he opened a legal practice in Maysville in 1857. In the 1860 election, Dye was one of only seven voters in Maysville who voted to elect Lincoln. He was writing to a Bethany classmate, Richard H. Pruitt, also a lawyer. Dye saw the situation very differently from Campbell, and in a sardonic tone outlined what he saw as the Southern argument for secession:

Not that we are tired of the Union, or believe it a failure. We know it is not. Not that we have any grievance that cannot be remedied in the Union. We know we haven't, & that our grievances would be a thousand times magnified by dissolution. . . . Yet South Carolina is going out, & we must not desert the South. We love the Union with all its glorious association but the North must concede or we will go with the South. . . .

The North may have the Declaration of Independence—(all gas, its author an infidel & abolitionist). We will cherish the address of [R. B.] Rbett, the statesman philosopher, [of] the Southern people.

The North may love the Constitution, her 'mud sills' may celebrate the 4th of July & talk of the American Eagle & stars & stripes. For our part we are satisfied the Constitution is a [fa]lure & Republicanism is a humbug—the North will go speedily to ruin. We are going to have a grand government of slaveholders. We will repeal the 4th of July, as S.C. has already done, and celebrate the 20th of Dec. when the accursed Union was dissolved, & we will have for our glorious standard the rattlesnake Flag of the Palmetto State. . . .

We know Lincoln is pledged to execute the fugitive slave law & that he will swear to support the Constitution. . . . But we must not desert our Southern brethren—the North must concede or we will go out.

Shortly after writing this letter, Dye found the atmosphere in Maysville too Southern for his liking. He moved to Indianapolis, worked on the Republican *Indianapolis Journal*, and practiced law in partnership at different times with two prominent Republicans, William P. Fishback and Addison J. Harris.

The collections in which these two letters are found are SC 2493 (Leander M. Campbell) and SC 2490 (John T. Dye). These collections, and many others, are available to researchers at the Society's library. The library is open from 8:00 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. Monday through Friday, and 8:00 A.M. to 4:00 P.M. on Saturday (September through May). For more information, call the library at (317) 232-1879, fax (317) 233-3109, or e-mail reboomer@iquest.net.